

**W**hy, how and when did the Brethren Movement begin? Wherein does it differ from other denominational groups? These and similar questions are often asked by strangers who come in contact with Brethren people. As in the case of all other denominations, there are definite answers to such questions. Informed Brethren people can tell the story of the beginnings and development of their Fellowship. As in most cases, God used a man to bring this denomination into existence.

Alexander Mack is his name. He was born at Schriesheim, Germany, in 1679, of pious parents who belonged to the Reformed Church. This was one of the three state churches in Germany at that time, the other two being the Roman Catholic and the Lutheran. To belong to any other was to be a heretic. Mack in his early years became dissatisfied with the formalism and superficial study of the Scriptures that characterized the state churches to a large degree, and he became a Separatist. In due time, he located in Schwarzenau, a quiet village on the

Eder River in Westphalia. Here he plied the trade of a miller and became quite well to do. In Schwarzenau he enjoyed close fellowship with other Separatists, especially with Ernst Christopher Hochmann, an ardent pietist. Together Mack and Hochmann made many preaching trips along the Rhine. Mack learned much from this companion in the realm of preaching and Bible content. Mack agreed with Hochmann in stressing the importance of consistent living as well as right doctrine. They talked heart to heart about the religious conditions of the time, the matters of New Testament ordinances and of church organization.

It was on this latter matter that the two men came to disagreement. They could not find fellowship in the established churches, but to remain simply Separatists was to be deprived of the ordinances of God's house and the means of spiritual growth afforded thereby. Hochmann's mystical tendencies enabled him to halt here, but Mack's greater resoluteness would not let him be satisfied with anything

short of an organization in which he could practice the rites and ordinances of the New Testament as he understood them. This led Mack to the organization of the German Baptist Brethren as it was commonly called for many years. It was also called Dunkers.

Prior to the organization of the new church, Mack and his sympathizers at Schwarzenau studied carefully the Scriptures and came to the conclusion that trine immersion was the scriptural method of baptism. They were convinced that in connection with the observance of the Bread and the Cup at communion, there should also be the washing of the saints' feet and the Love Feast. Other matters were discussed and decisions made. Thus, in the background of the organization of the new denomination, it is clearly evident that there was a total commitment to the authority of the Word of God. As yet they had not adopted the motto, "The Bible, the whole Bible and nothing but the Bible" which later was to become the Brethren's doc-

# Alexander Mack, Founder of the Brethren Movement



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**By Dr. Homer A. Kent, Sr.**

*Dissatisfied with the superficial state churches, Alexander Mack went on his own to form the foundation of the Brethren Movement.*

trinal guide, but practically they did so.

The occasion of the beginning of the Brethren Church at Schwarzenau in 1708 is simply told by Martin Grove Brumbaugh in these graphic words:

"Eight pious souls, after careful prayer and prolonged study, relying only upon God and the Bible to guide them and their followers forever, walked slowly, solemnly and heroically from the house of Alexander Mack to the River Eder, which, like a silver

thread, wound its way through the heart of a rich and varied landscape. Here the pious eight, in the early morning, surrounded by many witnesses, knelt in prayer, and then one of them led Alexander Mack into the water and immersed him three times, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Then Alexander Mack baptized the other seven, and these eight, perhaps the first to receive trine immersion in the history of the Protestant Church, then

organized a new congregation. This new congregation chose one of their number, Alexander Mack, as their leader, and thus began the Taufers or German Baptist Church, as a separate and distinct organization" (p. 29, *History of the Brethren*).

The new congregation at Schwarzenau suffered violent persecution due to the fact that it was an "illegal" church, not belonging to one of the prescribed three state churches. Some fled from Schwarzenau to other parts of Germany, even as far as to Switzerland and Denmark. Several other congregations came into being with similar experiences of persecution.

One group under Peter Becker left Krefeld in 1719 and came to America hoping to find peace and an opportunity to worship and expand as they felt persuaded. Alexander Mack, the main subject of this article, remained in Europe until 1729. Prior to this, in 1720, being sorely persecuted at Schwarzenau, he and his congregation fled to Westervain, Holland, where they remained until the call to America prevailed.

Mack and his entire congregation set sail for the New World. They were joyfully met by the first party that had come to these shores under the leadership of Peter Becker ten years before. Germantown, Pennsylvania, was the headquarters of the Brethren and the site of the first Brethren Church in America. The group in America was greatly encouraged by the presence of their original leader, but Alexander Mack lived only six years after coming to America, leaving his example as a cherished heritage for those who were to follow him.

Alexander Mack has left a legacy for future generations which has been followed in three particular ways among others:

*First*, Mack's dependence upon the authority of God's Word has been, and is witnessed in numerous ways. For one thing, soon after the followers of Mack came to America there was the feeling that the German Bible, trans-

This portrait of Alexander Mack will appear in the Christian Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio.





lated by Luther in 1534, should be made available to the Colonists in the English language. How could the church expect to grow without access to the Word of God in the language of the American people? And so the famous Sower Bible came off the press in 1743. Two successive editions followed in 1763 and 1776. This translation has the distinction of being the first translation of the Bible from a European language into English in America. This unique production aided in stamping the Brethren people as followers of the Bible. Christopher Sower and his son Christopher, Jr., were the printers of this Bible. These two men were vitally associated with the Brethren movement, Christopher, Jr., being a leading elder in the Germantown Church. From that day to the present, the Bible has been the final authority for Brethren people in faith and practice. In 1882, when a divisive spirit entered the church, the Progressive Brethren adopted as their motto, "The Bible, the whole Bible and nothing but the Bible." This motto endures to the present and appears at the beginning of *The Message of the Brethren Ministry* adopted in 1921 and revised in 1969.

In 1914-21 when winds of heretical doctrine were blowing across the Brotherhood from certain quarters, a definite statement on the inspiration of the Scriptures was adopted by the national ministerium and incorporated into *The Message of the Brethren Ministry*. It follows: "The ministry of the Brethren Church desires to bear testimony to the belief that God's supreme revelation has been made through Jesus Christ, a complete and authentic record of which revelation is the New Testament; and to the belief that the Holy Scripture of the Old and New Testaments, as originally given, are the infallible record of the perfect, final and authoritative revelation of God's will, altogether sufficient in themselves as a rule of faith and practice."

This statement was later adopted by the national conference and has been incorporated in substance in the revised statement of faith adopted in 1969 by the National Conference of the National Fellowship of Brethren Churches. If Alexander Mack were here, we believe he would thoroughly agree with this statement.

And as one can see from carefully examining the statements of faith as adopted by the ministerium and general conference of the National Fellowship, all the doctrinal statements set forth therein are carefully taken from the inspired Scriptures. Thus as Mack desired at the beginning, the National Fellowship is immersed in the Word of God and moves forward under its sole authority.

*Second*, Alexander Mack's insistence on evangelism is still being strongly emphasized in the Brethren Church. The words to Adam and Noah, "Be ye fruitful and multiply" came to Mack and his followers with peculiar adaptation. They applied these words in a spiritual sense and at once began to add to their numbers

in The Brethren Home Missions Council whose aim is the establishment of new Bible-believing churches in every state in the continental United States. It has already been successful in establishing scores of churches, and its commitment promises greater things in the future as our Lord tarries in His Coming.

This missionary zeal is also witnessed by the Foreign Missionary Society of the Brethren Church which seeks the salvation of the lost in foreign lands. It is seen in Grace Schools which prepares men and women for missionary outreach. The same missionary zeal is witnessed in various ways in the Missionary Herald Company and in the other organizations of the National Fellowship of Brethren

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souls for whom Christ died. Because of their evangelistic urge, a group of churches were organized in Germany. But, alas, this same zeal brought persecution upon them, and they were permitted to remain only twenty-one years in Europe before they came to America. This zeal did not die when they arrived in America. History records three missionary journeys emanating from Germantown from 1722-24. One of these resulted in the organization of the first Brethren Church in America at Germantown. The second missionary journey in 1723 resulted in six converts. Since as yet there was no church for those new converts to enter, it was decided that it was time to organize a church in which these converts could be nurtured. And so on Christmas Day in 1723 three memorable events took place: the organization of the first Brethren Church in America, the first baptisms, and the first three-fold communion service observed.

From that day to this, the exhortation that so moved Alexander Mack and his associates, "Be fruitful and multiply" has motivated the Brethren Church. Especially is this exemplified

Churches. The example of Mack is not being forgotten.

A *third* legacy from Alexander Mack is that of congregational church government. From the occasion of Mack's insistence upon a vote of the initial eight to determine who would perform the right of the first baptism until the present, the local church is sovereign in the conduct of its affairs within the denominational doctrinal framework. District and national conferences are composed of delegates elected by the constituent churches. Their actions are only advisory, not mandatory. This policy of church government, it is felt, best harmonizes with New Testament procedure. It dignifies the individual and guards against dictatorship with its attendant evils.

In summary, it is fair to say that Alexander Mack was the channel which God used to send forth to the world a Bible-centered ministry. When Brethren people have followed his example in belief and practice, they have prospered. When they have departed therefrom, there has been spiritual decline. He deserves to be remembered.

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